ED 423 205 THE OBJECTIVE IS OBJECTIVITY: A SURVEY OF TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the attitudes of "somewhat" religious teachers toward teaching about religion in the public schools with the attitudes of very religious teachers. The sample consisted of public school teachers enrolled in elementary and secondary education courses at two Texas universities during the summer of 1995. Data were collected through the use of a researcher-constructed survey. An independent t-test was used to test the hypothesis. The statistical results (t=1.17, df=60, alpha .05) suggest that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of very religious and somewhat religious teachers. The findings suggest the religious convictions of a teacher do not appear to affect that teachers attitude toward teaching about religion in public schools. (EH)

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The Objective is Objectivity:
A Survey of Teachers' Attitudes toward Teaching about Religion in the Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of "somewhat" religious teachers toward teaching about religion in the public schools with the attitude of "very" religious teachers. The sample for this study consisted of public school teachers enrolled in elementary and secondary education courses at two Texas universities during the summer of 1995. Data were collected through the use of a researcher constructed survey. An independent t-test was used to test the hypothesis. The statistical results ($t = 1.17$, $df = 60$, α .05) suggest that there is no significant difference between the attitudes of very religious and somewhat religious teachers. The findings of this study suggest that the religious convictions of a teacher do not appear to affect that teacher's attitude toward teaching about religion in public schools.

> The study of religion does not explain away religion or provide cheap answers to the deep questions religion raises. Religion, the questions it asks, the various answers it offers, and the commitments it invites are still there, for all persons to deal with in their own ways. (Ellwood, 1978)

STUDYING ABOUT RELIGION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public school teachers, in general, and social studies teachers, in particular, are faced with the issue of teaching about the beliefs of world religious groups. It is important to note the difference between studying religion and studying about religion. The latter involves the study of world religions with presentation, but without advocacy, of the belief systems of the religion considered. The study of world religions as they relate to literature, history, politics, art, music, and culture is a vital, yet controversial, aspect of a public school education (Haynes, 1994).

The confusion over the appropriate place of religion in the public school curriculum has led some teachers to avoid the topic of religion altogether. Three factors have been identified which account for the neglect of the study about religion in public schools (Gaustad, 1992). First, there is confusion on the part of teachers as to the legality of teaching about religion. The uproar over religious practices in the public schools and subsequent Supreme Court cases have incorrectly led many to believe that religion is not allowed in any form. Second, many people view religion as a private issue that should not be discussed publicly. Teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing religion for fear of offending students and parents. Finally, there remains a great deal of ignorance concerning religions of the world. Some religious groups have been characterized as radicals or terrorists in media reports. This ignorance of the true nature of religious

groups among some teachers leads to a neglect of these groups in the classroom. This neglect results in further misunderstanding and prejudice.

Those in favor of studying about world religions argue that students must understand the powerful role of religion in order to develop insight into the cultures of the world. This insight is critical to creating a more tolerant society free from tension, suspicion, and prejudice (McMillan, 1984; Haynes, 1994). McMillan (1984) presents several arguments supporting the inclusion of the study of world religions in the public schools. First, schools can not provide a comprehensive education if major influential aspects of the human experience are omitted. McMillan asserts that students can not effectively respond to the world as adults without an understanding of the powerful role of religion. Second, it is important for students to develop a sensitive insight into the cultures of the world. The tension, suspicion, and prejudice that result from cultural ignorance will be reduced through a multicultural education, creating a more tolerant society. McMillan also cites curriculum concerns as a primary argument in favor of studying about world religions. Religion is an important element of culture and historical development, as well as a major motive in literature, art, music, and drama. Without an understanding of religion, these subjects would be incomplete. The omission of religion from the curriculum implies that religion is peripheral and dispensable. McMillan believes this to be a dangerous implication, because religion is undeniably a major political influence in the world. Denying students this understanding, denies them of an understanding of the world in which they live (McMillan, 1984).

Those opposed to the study about religion in public schools present several arguments (McMillan, 1984). First, some argue that teachers will be tempted to teach religion as fixed knowledge and will not provide the necessary opportunities for free inquiry. Furthermore, it is argued that open-inquiry and critical thought will be viewed as destructive by many religious groups because religions are closed-value systems which are not open to analysis. Some contend that teaching religion in an objective and non-sectarian way will dilute the religious beliefs of the students by implying that all religions are equally valid. Second, some doubt the ability of teachers to teach about religion in an objective and non-sectarian manner. It is argued that teachers may be unable to approach the study of religion objectively because of their own values and commitments (McMillan, 1984). Teachers with strong religious convictions may have difficulty presenting an objective perspective on world religions whose beliefs systems conflict with those of the teacher. This concern about the objectivity of teachers is the focus of this study.

PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

This study was intended to determine whether the religious convictions of a teacher affect that teacher's attitude toward teaching about religion in the public schools. For the purpose of this study, religion is defined as a set of beliefs and values, especially about explanations that concern the cause and nature of the universe, to which an individual or group has a strong loyalty and attachment, as well as the moral code, rituals, and institutions that reinforce and propagate its beliefs (Banks, 1993). The purpose of this study was to compare the attitude of "somewhat religious" teachers toward teaching

about religion in the public schools with the attitude of "very religious" teachers toward teaching about religion in the public schools. It is hypothesized teachers perceiving themselves as "very religious" will have statistically significant different mean scores on the researcher's survey from teachers perceiving themselves as "somewhat religious".

SAMPLE

The sample for this study consisted of public school teachers enrolled in elementary and secondary education courses at two Texas universities during the summer of 1995. The data were collected using a cluster sample in which random classes of education students were asked to respond to the survey. Three classes at the University of Texas at El Paso and one class at the University of North Texas responded to the survey. The classes at the University of Texas at El Paso consisted primarily of undergraduate students preparing to become teachers. The class at the University of North Texas was a graduate class consisting mostly of practicing public school teachers.

INSTRUMENTS AND VARIABLES

The instrument used in this study was a survey developed by the researcher. The survey consisted of ten statements relating to the study of religion in public schools. Six of the ten statements (1,3,4,5,8,10) expressed feelings in favor of studying about religion in public schools. The remaining four statements (2,6,7,9) expressed arguments opposed to studying about religion. The respondents were grouped according to their self-reported degree of religiosity. Of the ninety-six respondents, thirty-one circled "very" religious,

sixty-two circled "somewhat" religious, and only three viewed themselves as "not-at-all" religious. Due to the low number of respondents in the final category, the "not-at-all religious" group was not considered in the analysis of the data.

The surveys were scored by assigning point values to the responses. Statements three and four were not included in the scoring because the wording was determined to be too vague and subject to interpretation. These statements also do not pertain to the specific problem of this study. For statements expressing sentiments in favor of studying about religion (1,5,8,10), a score of four points was assigned for responses of "strongly agree", three points for "agree", two points for "disagree" and one point for "strongly disagree". The statements expressing opposition to studying about religion (2,6,7,9) were assigned scores of one point for "strongly agree" to four points for "strongly disagree". Therefore, the possible score range was between eight and thirty-two. A high score indicated a positive attitude toward teaching about religion in public schools.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The non-directional comparison hypothesis of this study requires a two-tailed test. An independent t-test was used to test the null hypothesis. The researcher had a slight concern for reducing the chance of a Type II error. The level of significance chosen was .05 because the researcher wanted to be slightly confident that the test would detect statistical significance if it existed.

FINDINGS

The null hypothesis was accepted. The t-test result from the data ($t = 1.17$) was less than the t-table value (2.000; $df = 60$, $\alpha = .05$) and the p value of .245 was much greater than the α of .05. According to this study, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean survey scores of teachers perceiving themselves as "very religious" and the mean survey scores of teachers perceiving themselves to be "somewhat religious".

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the religious convictions of a teacher do not appear to affect that teacher's attitude toward teaching about religion in public schools. There are some important limitations to the generalizability of this study. First, the study was not a random sample and was collected from a geographically narrow population. The results may, at best, be generalized to the population of teachers in the El Paso, Texas and Denton, Texas areas. Second, the grouping of the respondents was based on a broad and subjective measure. Those who consider themselves "somewhat religious" may represent a very wide range of beliefs and convictions. Finally, the controversial nature of this topic likely led to very different interpretations of the survey statements. The mean scores of approximately twenty for both groups represent a midpoint score on the survey. The teachers responding to the survey, therefore, appear to exhibit neither an overly positive nor an overly negative attitude toward religious studies. This result may be due to the controversial nature of the topic and the differing interpretations of the survey statements.

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APPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that teachers may be unsure of the role of religion in the curriculum of public schools. It is encouraging to report that those teachers with strong religious convictions do not appear to be biased in their attitudes toward this subject. The argument opposed to studying about religion based on the lack of objectivity of teachers with strong religious convictions, in this case, appears to be invalid.

A few recommendations may be suggested based on the findings of this study. First, a large scale study should be performed involving a random sample from geographically varied areas to determine if these findings are consistent with the larger population of public school teachers in the United States. Second, based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that the public should feel somewhat confident in the ability of their teachers to teach about religion objectively. Finally, pending further research, it is necessary to identify the aspects of studying about religion that teachers and the public find objectionable so that these concerns may be addressed in curriculum planning.

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APPENDIX

Teacher Survey

TEACHER SURVEY

This survey is being conducted as a portion of a research project to determine the attitudes of teachers toward teaching **about** religion in the public schools. Please circle the response that best indicates your feelings toward the statement. Please make any additional comments that you may have regarding this subject on the reverse. Thank you for taking the time to help with this research.

LEVEL: **Pre-K Elementary Middle High School College**

I VIEW MYSELF AS _____ RELIGIOUS. (Circle One)
VERY SOMEWHAT NOT AT ALL

1. Schools can not provide a comprehensive education without the study of religions as they relate to history, politics, art, literature, music, culture, etc.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. Many teachers may be unable to teach about religion objectively because of personal beliefs.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. There is a need for values education in the public schools.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. Religion should be a part of values education in the public schools.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. The academic experience of students is significantly limited if they do not discuss questions of human existence and the nature of the universe at school.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. Critical inquiry of religions is destructive to the personal commitments of students.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. Objective teaching of religion will lead students to believe that all religions are equally valid.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. It is possible to give equal time and treatment to all major religions.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. It is difficult to obtain appropriate curriculum materials for objective teaching of religion.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. Teaching about religion is worth the possibility of friction with parents, students, and/or administrators.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree